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ABSTRACT

In contemporary American fiction, children are still dying. On the scale of innocence and guilt, there is a complete range, in 13 contemporary novels studied, from cases where the parents are clearly "innocent," to cases where they are clearly guilty. The novels are not about the children but instead are about the fictional midlife character who stands in for the reader. These plots are fundamentally about aging. Children have become signs of the burdensome responsibility of adulthood, and novels about the death of children reflect or utilize great anxiety about parenting. Plots in which children die emphasize the vulnerability of children in order to heighten the sense of risk for their parents. In these fictions, the most anxious parents are the very ones who kill their children. These novels can be divided roughly into two camps: recovery novels and decline novels. Recovery novels value memory; they trust the process of healing that occurs over time. The decline narrative is not heavy on expository comment but it implies decline by various narrative strategies. Time is a friend in recovery novels, but friendship can work slowly. One way recovery novels differ among themselves is in showing how active a character can be in reducing grief, regaining control, and restoring self-esteem. The decline novel maximizes shock, helplessness, guilt, and loss as the content of adulthood, making this type of novel appear timeless and irreversible. (Fifteen endnotes are included and a 13-item bibliography is attached.) (MG)

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Margaret Morganroth Gullette

SAFETY, RISK, AND RECOVERY
Women and Men as Parents in Contemporary American Fiction

I. Fictionality and its Biases: How Fiction Chooses Its Risk

Children do still die, alas, in life--but the risk of their doing so may now be greater in middle-class fiction than in middle-class reality.* I want first to emphasize the fictionality of this event when it is taken up to motivate a plot. In reality, infant mortality has dropped in the so-called First World (although it has gone up shockingly in what some are now calling the Fourth World), and many children's diseases are preventable or treatable. In American fiction, however, children are still dying--indeed, there seems to have been a spurt of child-deaths since 1960, when the publication of Updike's Rabbit, Run seemed to give writers renewed permission to use the plot. ** The writer who chooses this plot knows it has the potential to shock and disturb the reader.

All the fictional children who die are under the age of majority; mostly, well under; and several are infants. At such ages, they don't die by their own hand nor in cars they are driving themselves. Most die by accident; only one of illness. In other words, the issue

* This essay was originally a talk given at the Wellesley Center for Research on Women. It expands a short section of Chapter VII of the author's Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). The emphasis in that chapter, "In Defense of Midlife Progress Novels," is on how Western pessimism (as embedded in decline theories about the life course) affects the reception and production of midlife progress narratives. As one part of the defense, I briefly discuss the way suffering is represented in such novels. In this essay, I concentrate on one form of midlife suffering: the loss of a child, viewed as a fictional construction of midlife risk.

** See appendix for "A Selected Bibliography."

driving/producing these deaths cannot be suicide, or any actual social or medical problem of childhood. One fictional child dies for what might be called political reasons: as a result of the dread of slavery,in Toni Morrison's Beloved. But aside from Beloved, the deaths in these novels cannot be blamed on the outside world's coercions: and in all of them, I think, the main narrative interest is conceived as being domestic and psychological.

In the most sensational cases, all written by men until Morrison wrote Beloved, a parent kills his own child (usually it's a male parent) accidentally, or is somehow complicitous in the child's death. Many children's deaths have to be contrived, but plots that contrive parental complicity are often more unlikely than usual. In Heller's Something Happened, the son has been slightly wounded in an auto accident, but the father, overreacting and hugging him, smothers him to death. In Ironweed, Frances Phelan dropped his thirteen-day-old son while changing his diaper, and the infant died. In Rabbit, Run, it's the mother, who is drunk, who actually drowns the infant while giving it a bath, but the father, her husband, has run off and left her, so he too is guilty. In The World According to Garp, one son dies and another loses an eye in a bizarre accident for which both mother and father can be said to be at fault, but the reader is asked, I believe, to blame the mother more. I myself think that hostility toward women, who produce children, is involved in these stories where male authors construct plots so that it is women who kill the children (many readers will recall the archetypal one, Medea). Beloved goes back to the days of slavery to find the circumstances in which a mother might plausibly kill her own child (circumstances earlier described in

Harriet Beecher's Stowe's 1852 novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, where a proud, despairing woman named Cassy, sold into slavery, gives her newborn a fatal dose of laudanum). And there is one plot written by a woman in which the grandmother in effect kills the child: Rosellen Brown's The Autobiography of My Mother. On the scale of innocence and guilt, there's a complete range in these novels, from cases where the parents are clearly "innocent" and doubt it only in the first moment of grief, to cases where they are clearly guilty and know it, with cases of moral ambiguity or fudged responsibility in between. But in a sense that will need to be expanded later, by making the children so young and so vulnerable, all these novels take it that, even in the most innocent, accidental cases, parents are somehow responsible.

No novelist in this list has in fact killed his or her child; nor, as far as I know, has any of the other writers lost a child. But we always want to pay extra attention to plots that strain the mimetic: great psychological pressures (and beyond them, often great cultural pressures) must be at work producing them. I suspect there are many more novels containing or concerning the deaths of children than I have listed, but even if there were no more, we would want to pay attention to them.

After their fictionality, the next thing to say about this group of novels is that they are not about the children themselves. One proof is that the children often have only walk-on parts, with very few lines. In many nineteenth-century novels, the treatment was quite different. Dickens and Louisa May Alcott and other writers did give the children who would die full personalities; and the reader was asked to sit by the deathbed, and was taught how to behave in a last illness, and led to shed tears for that particular child. We now label

such scenes sentimental, perhaps because of our aversion to death and dying, and they have vanished from contemporary fiction, depriving us, I believe, of an emotional outlet and a form of life. But the main point here is that focusing on the death as belonging to the child has become (for now, for fiction) culturally impossible.

II Aging in Fiction

If these novels are not about the children, who are they about? As the matter of parental responsibility suggested, they're about us--the fictional midlife character (I or she or he) who stands in for us. Then why do authors writing about us kill our children? I'm going to try to answer this question, understanding that analyzing cultural phenomena as they occur is an intellectual operation fraught with complications and undecidables.

My own theory begins with the idea that these plots are fundamentally about aging. [1] Aging is what characters do in narrative, whatever else they do--or, put another way, what we all-too-vaguely call "temporality" in narrative is the sum of the author's ways of representing a character's life-in-time. How characters react to the passing of time--most of all, whether they fear it or not--contributes largely to a novel's attitudes toward aging. Usually without our knowing it, then, we are receiving from fiction constant signals about time: its passing, its effects, and reactions to all of it--in short, aging.

Some midlife fictions, but fortunately not all, convey little but the fear of aging, while others conquer fears associated with aging and demonstrate that aging can be in some ways a cure.

The novelists I'm talking about range in age from 36 to 56, which is not old now. So, this is the moment to notice that worrying about aging in our culture can begin at puberty; that death anxiety can overwhelm adolescents; and that the subjective clock can begin audibly ticking even before a character has stepped over the theshold of marriage and the first child is born.[2]

The novel itself has grown up through the life course during the

past two centuries. From Tom Jones, through Austen, much of Dickens and Eliot, and up through Harlequin Romances, the novel's main characters have been adolescents, and the crucial event that has served as the marker of adulthood has been their wedding. By the "marker," I mean the event that spelled forward movement in the life course if you achieved it, and failure for life if you didn't. Eventually, however, there began to be novels about what goes on after the wedding. At first these were novels about adultery or the mere threat of adultery. It's notable that as soon as there are novels about even the threat of adultery (or cuckoldry), children are at risk. In Rousseau's Julie (1763), Julie dies after rescuing a child of hers who fell into the water, and on her deathbed confesses her repressed love for her erstwhile lover, whom she was not allowed to marry; and in Goethe's Elective Affinities (1809), one of the punitive outcomes of another repressed adultery is that a baby dies (in water). Franco Ferrucci, one of the few other literary critics who have dealt with this theme, thinks that earlier writers from Goethe to Mann (all his examples are male) identified their creativity with child-figures, and that when a child is killed off it expresses a (man's) fear that he is losing precious qualities such as creativity and energy. [3] If true, this too represents a fear of aging--which a Romantic view might describe as the movement that gradually, inexorably draws us further away from childhood. At the same time (as if that were not bad enough) aging past childhood inexorably leads us, female and male alike, into sexuality.

Just as in the nineteenth-century, many novels about young-adulthood still express guilt or a warning about sexuality. We can read into them either the awareness that sexuality is hedged with social restrictions, especially for women, or the writer's internalized belief that punishment

should follow sexual wrongdoing. Nowadays, in a sexually freer age, the same dreads require a plot in which real adultery precedes the child's death. Rabbit, Run has such a plot, and so does The World According to Garp. In the first case it is the man's sexuality that is dangerous and needs to be controlled, and in the second, although the man has had affairs (treated as mere harmless flings), it is the woman's adultery that causes all the trouble and is so dreadfully punished. Many people in our culture have thrown away the links between sex and sin, and sin and punishment, and sin and death, and women and sin and death. But some people--women and men--who have internalized these associations will continue to kill fictional children because of them.

In general, however, as sexuality and adultery have become less fraught, children are less likely to figure as the instruments through whom guilty parents are punished. Instead, they have become signs of the burdensome responsibility of adulthood--a fate common to all (parents). Novels concerning the death of children construct and reinforce the notion that the long process of child-tending begins at the birth of the vulnerable infant, and that it goes on until some time after sixteen (when, presumably, the child becomes responsible for herself or himself). These novels are thus part of the way our culture envisions the middle of the life-course--as a period whose central passage is a perilous parenting. Once this is generally established in the culture, of course, a writer need not (theoretically) even be a parent to use the material. It could be said that the theme of the death of the child is part of the price we pay (some may decide that it's part of the gain we get) for the fact that fiction has now finally written itself into this arena of the life course.

In case we are so embedded in our own cultural constructions that we

think the focus on this risk perfectly "natural," let me point out that fiction could conceive of adulthood quite otherwise. There are no end of real and imaginable risks. Novels could conceive of the span of the middle as primarily spousal (or fraternal or filial) rather than parental--and some do. But for the moment in the fiction of adulthood, the death of a child is more critical than the death of a spouse, parent, or sibling. Perhaps divorce and remarriage have made spouses seem more replaceable, and commitment to spouses less obligatory. When women write about the death of the men in their lives, for example, it turns out to be because they have lived the facts, not imagined them. (If a Lael Tucker Wertenbaker or an Oriana Fallaci wants to write about the death of a man, she does it in a documentary form.) Children are now the irreplaceable: caring for them is obligatory, and loving them is obligatory. Therefore, the loss of a child can presumably be read by all novel readers, even those without children, as an "unmitigated loss." The list of alternative risks could be considerably extended. Outside of family, there are yet other possibilities for midlife fiction: the major risk could be job loss, as in Death of a Salesman; it could be nuclear holocaust, as in Carolyn See's Golden Days; it could be a child living on, needing chronic care; it could be about the adult character's own illness and death, as in Terms of Endearment. Yet despite all other possibilities, for this important and well-known subset of novels written between 1960 and now, the chosen "unscheduled event," the worst risk, has its source in the generation we produce and are responsible for. Why?

III Anxious Parents and Very Anxious Parents

Novels about the death of children reflect or utilize great anxiety about parenting--more than normal anxiety. Normal anxiety about responsibility and caretaking and unreadiness produces a different plot, less intense and dramatic--plots like those Margaret Drabble and Anne Tyler produced in their young-adulthood, in the Sixties and Seventies: Drabble's The Garrick Year (1964) and Thank You All Very Much (also known as The Millstone, 1965); Tyler's Celestial Navigation (1974) and Earthly Possessions (1977). These are about women who cope. Maybe the babies almost die: in The Garrick Year they are almost asphyxiated, and little Flora falls into the river, but both times they are saved--by their mother. She gives up a tasty adultery so she can fix her full attention on her children. Tyler seems to have taught herself how durable babies are--after her second novel, The Tin Can Tree, they are not at risk--but she certainly gives a complete picture of the unremitting attention they require--the paraphernalia of childhood lead to all the thickenings of life: high chairs first, and then "income tax and license renwals. . .bank statements and dental appointments and erroneous bills. . ." as the heroine says in the aptly titled Earthly Possessions. [4] But these are novels about being a young (female) adult who finds she is able to bear the burdens and responsibilities of adulthood. The protagonists learn through practice that they are capable mums, that women survive parenting handily. Fathers scarcely have a role, but mothers can manage even alone. This is young-adult fiction in which aging shows that women become independent, competent and successful at a central life-course task. Later on, when the risk became having children leave the nest, they each wrote life-after-mothering stories: Tyler in

Searching for Caleb (in 1975, when her children were in fact not yet in their teens) and Drabble in The Middle Ground (1980).

Plots in which children die, on the other hand, emphasize the vulnerability of children in order to heighten the sense of risk for their parents that comes from proceeding this far in the life course. They assert that dreadful things can happen to us--that we create and then must endure terrible risk. They are fictional expansions of Francis Bacon's saying (so mysterious to young people) that children offer "hostages to fortune." That's why they assert that we adults are to some degree responsible even for events out of our control. Our danger begins with the baby. "I was responsible for the survival of this creature," Lynne Sharon Schwartz's heroine says (ominously) when her first baby is born. [5] When Tyler's Macon Leary starts fathering again, even though the child is not biologically his own, he feels

> a pleasant kind of sorrow sweeping through him. Oh, his life had regained all its old perils. He was forced to worry once again about nuclear war and the future of the planet. He often had the same secret, guilty thought that had come to him after Ethan was born: From this time on I can never be completely happy.
>
> Not that he ever was before, of course. [6]

In Beloved, Sethe decides not to have another baby. "She was frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring--again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer."[7] We don't realize at this point how ambiguous her wording is.

In these fictions, the most anxious parents are the very ones who kill their children: anxiety itself kills. In Beloved, Sethe, only

twenty-eight days escaped from slavery, fears the future for her children so much that she hastily tries to kill all of them when the slavers arrive to drag them back into humiliation and suffering. Hers is the most rational anxiety: how was she to know in 1855 that if she let Beloved live, the Emancipation Proclamation would eventually free her? Put other novels show that the peril for parent and child is created by the parents' own exaggerated fear. In John Irving's Garp, this becomes quite explicit in one of Garp's own stories: "The World According to Bensenhaver is about a man who is so fearful of bad things happening to his loved ones that he creates an atmosphere of such tension that bad things are almost certain to occur." [8] This explanation--male fear about coping with the responsibilities of adulthood--accounts directly for another father-caused death in Something Happened and indirectly for those in Rabbit, Run and that other runaway's story, Ironweed.

Psychoanalysis suggests a related, more disturbing explanation for why parentlove can be a "killer." Some parents repress a fear that a new child means a kind of death for themselves: to avoid this, the child has to be killed first--a preemptive strike. This is what Laius tried to do when he heard the oracle that his son Oedipus would grow up to kill him: he had Oedipus put out on the mountain to die. The oracle voices a father's anxiety for himself, a fear that something awful and uncontrollable will happen in the future: in this dire case, caused by his own progeny.

The level of anxiety in these novels, I want to suggest, varies with the writer's fear of time. More precisely, of aging. Aging can be interpreted as that very feeling that something awful and uncontrollable will happen in the future. Particularly in a society

terrified of aging, the birth of a baby, the existence of a child and the development of an adolescent--or even the apprehension of these events--can and do trigger a whole set of related fears: about sexual decline, economic powerlessness, surviving our own parents, being survived, losing self while caring for another, losing the parenting role. A melange of guilts and fears, hard to disaggregate. In turn, these can trigger ambivalence about children, the ostensible cause.

In most of our own life stories, I imagine, ambivalence turns out to be a passing moment, related to our own inexperience and our projection of a baby's fragility. It need not get associated negatively with aging. As I said with regard to Tyler and Drabble, the experience of mothering can be used in fiction to show that aging brings competence and relief from fear. But if aging, for whatever private reasons, becomes or remains dreadful, some writers will reach for a young-adult or midlife disaster-plot--and kill children.

Ambivalence about children is not a characteristic of men alone, who up until recently in our culture have been distanced from children, and have also deprived themselves of the remarkable life-course benefits that come from hourly, daily, detailed, parenting. Psychoanalysis of women's dreams shows that pregnant mothers often have severe ambivalence about becoming mothers. Now we also have evidence from novels set in young-adulthood and the midlife that _being_ a mother creates ambivalence too (small wonder). The gender-based difference is that women, in most cases, cannot escape the unremitting attentiveness that helps to overcome irrational anxiety. And this explains, I think, why young-adult fiction about surviving parenting without death is mostly written by women and and why the _Rabbit, Run_s and _Something Happened_s and _Garp_s have male

authors. But we have to explain Rosellen Brown's novel and Maureen Howard's and others. Women, of course, can also feel that their aging is negatively charged--that they have even more to fear from time than men do. We can't be surprised that women too have produced novels about the death of children, and even a few novels in which the surviving mothers are not allowed to recover.

IV Recovery versus Decline

In conclusion, then, authors kill children to set up the implied question, "Can I survive the worst that life can shove at me?" Implicitly, this question means, "Can I survive my own worst fear of aging?" The plot acutely poses the question as "Is time on my side or against me?" which in turn is one of the forms of the question, "Should I damn aging or value it?"

Some readers like a universal answer, an answer good for every case. If we look to these novels, though, they can be divided roughly into two camps: recovery novels and decline novels. The existence of a few borderline narratives should not obscure a rather binary division on the question of "survival": that is, whether the bereaved parent can recover and begin life again and perhaps even know that she or he has recovered.

The ones I prefer are the cure stories. In the last sections of this essay I hope to justify this preference--not on the grounds that meliorism is per se for each of us a better belief and attitude than pessimism (although I do believe it is, as do--according to therapists--most therapists). Instead, I'd like to make a case that the cure stories can teach us more because they have thought through the complete condition of loss with more imaginative completeness. They give us a fuller account of the entire experience. It's true that with the exception of Disturbances in the Field, they omit the parents' reception of the news of the death of the child, and thus de-emphasize the first moment of loss. Nevertheless, they tell us what mourning is like and how to deal with it, as the decline stories do not.

Recovery plots do not hustle us into consolation, as some people

think the culture at large does: they say instead what Frank Bascombe says at the end of The Sportswriter, looking back at the four years since his son died. "Grief, real grief, is relatively short, though mourning can be long." [9] No recovery novel recommends oblivion--on the contrary, they all value memory. But they trust the process of healing that occurs over time. They count on time to bring relief from what they identify as the most hurtful parts of loss: the self-blame and the ingenious self-punishments, the irrational anger at the other spouse, if present; the sense that nothing of one's self is left (that one's identity is constituted solely by being a parent), the shock of the rediscovery of loss over and over. Novels that describe recovery comment on the spirit--they say that it has some strength in the face of the vicissitudes of adult life. Novels with older characters who have aged and suffered and yet demonstrate surival probably carry more conviction. Even in our culture, for some things, it helps to have aged a little. At thirty-four, Updike described as a discovery an observation he had made, via aging, about aging. "We do survive every minute, after all, except the last." [10]

The other kind of novel--which I call the decline narrative--doesn't say right out that we succumb. It isn't heavy on expository comment. But it implies this by various narrative strategies. One of these strategies is to end right after the death of the child. Still in the nightmare, before any healing has begun. In The Autobiography of My Mother, Rosellen Brown has the protagonist's only child vanish into an abyss three pages before the end. The grandmother should have been holding the four-year-old's hand; just before she vanished, the child's mother tried to shout to her to hold onto her hand, but she

wasn't heard above the circumambient noise. The three pages left don't provide even for the beginning of grief. They don't even try to: they're holding us in the shock of the first moment. They provide only enough time for the protagonist to get an awful kind of revenge on her seventy-two-year-old mother. The daughter has always been a "mess"; the mother is an elderly respected lawyer, well-organized but chilly; more detached from her daughter than critical of her, but her criticisms are implicit. The revenge, in the last page, is to see her mother, no longer omnipotent, but guilty at last, collapse and cry. This view of young-adult parenting forces us up against the daughter's self-pity, her inability to take over adult responsibility. The gist of the ending is "my life fails forever because you failed me and you continued to fail me, and now it's your fault I don't have my daughter: there wasn't much before and now there's nothing at all. How can I possibly survive adulthood."

Something Happened also ends shortly after the doctors tell Bob Slocum that his boy would have lived if Bob had not smothered him in his frenzy of anxiety at seeing him lying on the ground suffering. The child's death illustrates, and ends, the adult's neurotic identification with him. Slocum has told us that the "the boy" (whom he never calls by name) is the only person he truly loves. He too has put all his eggs in this one basket. "I have this constant fear something is going to happen to him. . . I think about death. I think about it all the time. I dwell on it. I dread it. I don't really like it."[11] Even the boy's tonsillectomy was a narcissistic horror for him: he had to leave the boy alone at night in order to try to escape from the child's pain. "I identify with him too closely, I think" (p. 317). What he identifies with is the child's vulnerability--not his

sweetness or docility, but, Slocum tells us, his failures at school, his fear of the dark, the way he expects the worst from time and longs to have it come--"just to get it over with" (205). The identity between them on their negative sides almost makes one think that Slocum needs his son to die to kill his own vulnerability by proxy. Heller shows that for Slocum, the Child means not creativity, but weakness. Before the boy's death, Slocum already feels guilty. "I think I'm in terrible trouble. I think I've committed a crime. The victims have always been children" (519). Rabbit Redux, three years earlier, thought almost the same thing about his guilt: "He knows he is criminal, yet is never caught."[12] And Heller could have been talking about the two first Rabbit novels when he noticed that "The victims have always been children." If one weak small victim dies, will the grownup be free of weakness and smallness? And in fact in the few pages after the boy's death, Slocum succeeds in all his financial and status ambitions, but of course, none of them can matter any more.

I think there should be a moratorium on killing a child in the last quarter of a novel; a fortiori, on the last page. Such a structure not only shows no recovery, it can barely show grief. Its mode after the death is the fictional equivalent of shocked silence: the end of a chapter, the blank page. Or the intentionally inadequate response: "I miss him" (Heller).[13] The implication is that this state of loss will go on forever. Worse, such a fictional structure can be filled with fearful anticipation up to the death. Even if the death occurs relatively early in the novel, room is made to construct fearful anticipation of the future. In Rabbit, Run, as soon as Janice gets drunk and decides to give the baby a bath, every reader knows what will happen. There are some excruciating pages to get through, as

we approach the inevitable with horror and aversion. Even in Disturbances in the Field, a recovery novel, the first half is full of dread, foreshadowing some awful event. "Everything had the chance to be so beautiful, and look what has happened," the narrator says, when nothing has yet happened, and Schwartz won't let her tell us what happened for another 150 pages. Decline novels force us through the fictional experience that fears come true. By midlife we usually learn that fears don't all come true, and we learn to control anxiety, and even discard some anxieties. Novels like these construct anxiety again.

Some do this also by forcing us through the correlative experience, that hopes of a certain kind don't come true. At one point, at a pot party, Schwartz's Lydia imagines her midlife-to-come as a relatively "safe" space of life. "Perhaps my greatest problem would be boredom. . . .the relief of growing up and believing that. . . things will happen, but you will be so ripe with experience as to be unable to feel wonder or terror, knowing that anything is possible and everything finally subsides. That was what I thought, high and ignorant" (p. 177). We're being warned in such novels to level down our hope and bring up our anxiety level: as another character says, "You can't afford to get overconfident when you're hot. The gods don't like that" (p. 155). As if our attitude could call down reward and punishment on our kids. One page after she has dared to say that she will be unable to feel "wonder or terror," two of Lydia's four children die. That's as quick as punishment comes in fiction. Not sexual sin but hope can be the adult crime in contemporary decline stories.

Pessimism, on the other hand, is "safe." If you want to be safe,

anticipate the worst. Decline narratives are in effect warnings about how to regard the future--it's not merely part of what they mean, but their main meaning. Treating the death of a child this way recalls and emphasizes what is sacred and secret and scary about the event in life. The effect of this treatment is to lower the reader's suspicion of the fictionality of the fiction, and wash over the resultingly less resistant reader with this flood of forebodings.

And yet Lydia recovers: so that while the first two-thirds of the plot punishes her crudely and obviously for overconfidence--for foolishly anticipating a braver kind of "safety"--the overall plot shows how she can recover (not from hope disappointed, a minor casualty at the cognitive level, but) from actual loss.

The recovery section of Disturbances in the Field seems weak and cliched to me. Yet many readers love and admire the book. I think this is precisely because it opens up a small space in which to make conscious the superstition inherent in pessimism, and because it suggests that over the life course we recover not just from loss but from our false belief in the magic powers of our mind to control life and death. Underlying many fictional deaths is the writer's more or less conscious fear that our ambivalence about our children will kill them. The recovery novel says that our children may die, but not because we wanted them to.

V Time and Recovery

Time is a friend in recovery novels, but friendship can work slowly. In all but Disturbances in the Field, the death has occurred years before the novel opens, sometimes ten or twenty years before, giving the protagonists a long retrospect. These slow-recovery narratives are constructed so that the accident or the crime occurred in passionate, dangerous young adulthood, while the healing takes place in a more contemplative midlife. These are safe-at-last stories. Francis Phelan dropped his baby and left his home twenty-two years before: it takes that long before he can bear to remember Gerald and think about his other crimes: then in two days at the age of fifty-eight he expiates and stops trying to run or die. Sethe in Beloved killed her baby when she was nineteen; having punished herself for eighteen years by solitude, celibacy and forgetfulness, at thirty-seven she finds courage to take up with a man, remember, over-expiate, forgive herself, and begin to recover. Hannah Burke, the sixtyish therapist in Other Women, whose children died several decades before, finds that she has been punishing herself unknowingly. She has deprived herself of the risk of new relationships, because of an unconscious fear of "the inevitable aftermath": withdrawal. Her cure at sixty takes the risky form of making a friend who is the age her lost daughter would have been. As a therapist, she argues most wryly and explicitly for the value of time. "What about her own despair? It didn't seem to be around much anymore. . . . The older she got, the less anything could upset her for very long. Maybe the only real cure for her clients was the aging process. But that could take years." [14]

Even where recovery does not take so long, midlife protagonists

can be grateful to time. As Lydia Powe's marriage to Victor begins to disintegrate because they mourn so differently, she prophesies, "This land of ours, coarsened by blight, cannot endure. It's only a matter of time" (Disturbances, p. 41). And they do separate. But other things too are a matter of time: Lydia buys a coloring book, one of the ways she already knows of making herself feel that she can get things back in her own control. She starts playing music again; she calls friends; eventually she plans to ride on buses and work on snow. (And eventually she wants her husband back, and he returns.) When you start using your strengths in your favor, employing your multiple identities in your favor, braving your superstitions, the healing process is underway. Where decline narratives threaten parents (and non-parents too), recovery novels are written as if to sufferers of loss, to help.

One way recovery novels themselves differ is in showing how active a character can be in reducing grief, regaining control, restoring self-esteem. Updike shows recovery as a rather passive process. Ten years after Janice Angstrom drowned her baby, "that was terrible, the most terrible thing ever, but even that had faded, flattened, until it seemed it hadn't been her in that room but an image of her, and she had not been alone, there had been some man in the room with her. . . ." (p. 54). Ten years after the other death for which he is partly responsible, Harry Angstrom in Rabbit Is Rich feels that "The years have piled on, the surviving have patched things up, and so many more have joined the dead, undone by diseases for which only God is to blame, that it no longer seems so bad, it seems more as if Jill just moved to another town, where the population is growing." [15] The recoveries happen between the novels (which Updike in fact

wrote ten years apart), so that we don't see the stages of the cure: it looks as if "time" alone had done the trick.

Richard Ford's The Sportswriter makes Frank Bascomb an active, self-conscious optimist: a man who goes into his familiar mental gymnastics whenever anything bad happens to him--it is open to us to believe that he has learned these routines from having survived his little boy's death. He refuses to let the sorrow of the past lead to fear of the future. "All we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with our life" (p. 25). The past "should be just uninteresting enough to release you the instant you're ready (though it's true that when we get to that moment we are often scared to death)" (p. 24). Frank has a positive belief in the future. "There is mystery everywhere. You have only to let yourself in for it. You can never know what's coming next. Always there is the chance it will be--miraculous to say--something you want" (p. 342).

Mental manipulations that are somewhat less self-conscious get built into the recovery-narratives that other writers invent. When Hannah Burke's surviving children have grown up and left, she could use this to create a catalog of losses for herself, but instead she converts it into a good feeling. "Occasionally she felt lonely, but it was easy to convert that into a sense of delicious solitude" (Other Women, p. 61). No progress novelist treats such conversions for the sake of recovery ironically; many admit a category of what we might call valuable illusions. To help console himself for his son's death, Macon Leary in The Accidental Tourist creates an image of Ethan aging in heaven.

And if dead people aged, wouldn't it be a comfort? To

> think of Ethan growing up in heaven--fourteen years old now instead of twelve--eased the grief a little. . . . The real adventure, he thought, is the flow of time: it's as much adventure as anyone could wish. And if he pictured Ethan still part of that flow--in some other place, however unreachable---he believed he might be able to bear it after all. (p. 354)

By giving his son an independent, parallel life, Macon gives himself permission to have such a life: it marks one end within his continuum of mourning.

The decline novel maximizes shock, helplessness, guilt, and loss as the content of adulthood, and makes them appear timeless and irreversible: whether we have lost a child or not, its effect (unless we resist its message) is to make adults dread the next blow from the future. The midlife recovery novel, on the other hand, uses its painful subject to invent ways of imagining a life we might still want after loss. By showing recovery coming in time, it puts time on our side. Once we know that, we put ourselves on the side of time. We may thus find ourselves, to our fine surprise, also praising aging.

Endnotes

1. The theoretical grounds of my position are set forth in my work-in-progress, Midlife Fictions, which also describes the history of European and American fictional constructions of the middle years of life.

2. Psychologists like Joann Montepare, also of the Wellesley Center, now ask undergraduates "What appeals to you about getting older?" "What do you fear about it?" They fear many of the future life events I list on p. 12. The measure Montepare uses is called a "fear-of-aging scale." (Nota bene: not a "hope-of-aging scale.") At large in the culture, the idea that very young people fear aging may seem peculiar. But our refusal to conceive of aging as an issue of consciousness--our persistence in thinking it can be nothing but bodily decay, a problem for "old" people--is part of the decline ideology.

3. Franco Ferrucci, "The Dead Child," talk delivered at Harvard in March 1987. I owe a debt to Shaun O'Connell, whose talk on the dead child in contemporary fiction, delivered (also at Harvard) about ten years ago, kindled my interest in the topic--which I then wished to view from a midlife perspective. Neither of these talks has been published.

4. Anne Tyler, Earthly Possessions (NY: Knopf, 1977), p. 133-134.

5. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Disturbances in the Field (NY: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 133.

6. Anne Tyler, The Accidental Tourist (NY: Knopf, 1985), p. 258.

7. Toni Morrison, Beloved (NY: Knopf, 1987), p. 132.

8. John Irving, The World According to Garp (NY: Dutton, 1978), p. 328.

9. Richard Ford, The Sportswriter (NY: Vintage, 1986), p. 374.

10. John Updike, "One Big Interview," Picked-Up Pieces (NY: Knopf, 1975), p. 519. This interview took place in 1966.

11. Joseph Heller, Something Happened (NY: Ballantine, 1975), p. 321.

12. John Updike, Rabbit Redux (NY: Knopf, 1971), p. 329.

13. Of the child-deaths in earlier fiction quoted or described in Garrett Stewart, Death Sentences (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), one in particular--that given to Barry Lyndon by Thackeray--sounds like the brusque midlife punishment-scenario of our own day, exemplified in Something Happened.

14. Lisa Alther, Other Women (NY: Knopf, 1984), pp. 216, 230.

15. John Updike, Rabbit is Rich (NY: Knopf, 1981), p. 73.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette

SAFETY, RISK, AND RECOVERY

The Death of Children in Contemporary American Novels About Women and Men In Adulthood and the Middle Years

A Selected Bibliography

1960 John Updike, Rabbit, Run. Infant (second child), drowned by drunken mother.

1971 John Updike, Rabbit Redux. "Child" ("Jill), frail underage woman, dies in her sleep when "protector's" house is burned.

1974 Joseph Heller, Something Happened. Nine-year-old son (favorite child) knocked down in auto accident; dies asphyxiated by father's hug.

1976 Rosellen Brown, Autobiography of My Mother. Four-year-old girl (only child) falls off cliff: neither mother nor grandmother is holding her hand.

1978 John Irving, The World According to Garp. One son blinded and the other dies in auto accident: father and mother both at fault.

1981 John Updike, Rabbit Is Rich. Father has recovered from deaths in earlier volumes of the trilogy. One other almost-adult child in family.

1983 Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Disturbances in the Field. Two children (one boy, one girl, youngest of four) die in bus accident on ski trip in snowstorm in 1981.

1983 William Kennedy, Ironweed. Thirteen-day-old infant dies from a fall when drunken father drops him. Two other children in family.

1984 Lisa Alther, Other Women. Two children, girl and boy, asphyxiated in freak home accident in which mother too nearly dies. Two other children in family.

1985 Anne Tyler, The Accidental Tourist. Only son, twelve, shot by holdup man at camp (first time away from home).

1986 Maureen Howard, Expensive Habits. Only son, sixteen ("Baby") stabbed by holdup man.

1986. Richard Ford, The Sportswriter. First child, son, nine, dies of Reyes' syndrome. Two other children in family.

1987 Toni Morrison, Beloved. Infant (one of four) killed by mother when slavers come. Present time 1873; flashback to 1855.

Authors' and Protagonists' Ages at Time of Publication of Novel

Updike (Rabbit, Run) 28; father (Harry Angstrom) is 26.

Updike (Rabbit Redux) 39; Harry is 36.

Irving, 36; father (Garp) is thirty at time of accident.

Brown, 37; mother (Renata) is twenty-nine.

Alther, 40; mother (Hannah Burke) is close to sixty at time of novel, children died perhaps twenty years earlier.

Ford, 42; father (Frank Bascombe) was 34 at time of death, is 38 when book opens, at Easter; book ends the following fall.

Tyler, 44; father (Macon Leary) was forty at time of accident, is forty-one when novel opens; forty-two when it ends.

Schwartz, 44; mother (Lydia) is forty-two at time of accident, novel ends eight months later.

Updike (Rabbit is Rich), 49; Rabbit is 46 when novel opens.

Heller, 51; father (Bob Slocum) is at least forty-seven when telling the story.

Kennedy, 55; father (Francis Phelan) was 36 at time of accident, is 58 when novel opens.

Howard, 56; Margaret Flood is 45 when accident happens.

Morrison, 56; Sethe is nineteen when she kills her baby; 37 when novel opens.

Novels of Recovery

1981 Rabbit Is Rich

1983 Ironweed, Disturbances in the Field

1984 Other Women

1985 The Accidental Tourist

1986 The Sportswriter

1987 Beloved